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THE SENTENCE AND THE VERB

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Far too many of the modern grammar-texts are at fault in their definitions of the sentence and of the verb. I quote almost at random from a few of the recent publications:

A complete thought expressed in words is a sentence;

A group of words expressing a complete thought is a sentence;

A sentence is the expression of a complete thought in words.

But grammar takes no heed as to whether the *thought* expressed in any sentence be complete or not. Grammar merely demands that the *expression* of the thought be complete, if the result shall be called a sentence. That is to say, every sentence must be a grammatical whole, having at least one subject with its predicate verb.

These definitions of the sentence hark back to the logical definition of a thought as synonymous with a *judgment*. Now the judgment, or logical proposition, is not necessarily the same thing as the sentence, and it is unfortunate for our school children that this fact has not yet been discovered by sundry book-makers. Observe, in its bearing upon this statement, the following definitions, taken from one of the most pretentious of the recent texts:

The subject of the sentence is the word or group of words which expresses the thought-subject.

The predicate is the word or group of words which expresses the thought-predicate.

The copula is the word or group of words which expresses the thought-relation.

Why Every Sentence in the English Language Must Have These Three Parts;

They beg is equal to *They are beggars* or *They are begging*.

They may write is equal to *They may be writing*.

He must go is equal to *He must be going*.

She does study is equal to *She does be studying*.

We do insist is equal to *We do be insisting*.

The boy had gone is equal to *The boy had been going*.

They have studied is equal to *They have been studying*.

His brother will have departed is equal to *His brother will have been departing*.

Every sentence in the English language not only may have three parts, but every sentence must have, either actually in it or implied in it, these three parts: subject, predicate, and copula. . . . No matter how many or how few words a sentence may contain, it is always made up of three parts: *subject*, *predicate*, and *copula*.

Teaching of this kind is an attempt to fit into the English sentence the laws underlying logical propositions. The result is something that is not good logic nor good grammar nor good English. It is absolutely false that every sentence is made up of three parts; and one proof of this statement is the fact that scores of grammars of German, French, Latin, and other languages, all agree in teaching that two words properly related, namely, the subject and its predicate verb, make a sentence.

Now the term *predicate* as used in logic and the term *predicate* as used in grammar are two wholly different things. In the proposition, "Grass is green," logic calls *green* the predicate; not so grammar. And although it is true that a grammatical predicate always implies a logical copula and a logical predicate, why attempt to teach baby-logic under the name of grammar? Certainly, if this is good teaching for English, it must be also good teaching for all other modern languages; but how absurd it would be for all the Harknesses and the Ollendorfs and the Whitneys, and the rest, to set at reconstructing the texts which have taught common-sense facts about verbs for many generations!

The rather obvious fact that every grammatical sentence must imply a corresponding logical proposition was clearly pointed out in the early grammar of Professor William Fowler, of Amherst College, published over half a century ago. Four chapters of Professor Fowler's voluminous text were given to "Logical Forms." In fact, the comprehensive work was undertaken chiefly for the instruction of college students in elementary logic. But Professor Fowler knew the difference between gram-

mar and logic, and he did not get his subjects nor himself mixed. He expressly stated: "The structure of propositions in language does not always coincide with the structure of propositions in logic." And again: "Propositions which do not contain the copula may be easily resolved into those which do. Thus, 'Gold surpasses all other metals in brilliancy' may be stated, 'Gold is superior to all other metals in brilliancy.' "

Observe that Professor Fowler did not perpetrate the absurdity, "*Gold is surpassing* all other metals in brilliancy"! And is it not evident at a glance that in the pairs of sentences quoted above and declared to be equivalent, there is no real equivalence either logical or grammatical? Even if we could pardon the intolerable English of "She does be studying" and of "We do be insisting," we cannot pardon the untruthfulness of the statement that the first sentence in each pair "is equal to" the second. But is it not marvelous that the simple and obvious facts of English grammar should thus elude the grasp of numerous psychologic and pedagogic educators who feel called to make grammar-books for the mystification of the young? If it were true, as several authors state, that verbs are *necessarily* resolved into the form of predication needful to the logical statement of a judgment, it would at once be necessary to rewrite all the grammars of the modern languages used in our schools. Luckily, the microbe of a mis-conceived logic has not yet affected the scholarly makers of the French and German language-texts, and these still teach the sound and unassailable doctrine that a verb is a word which makes an assertion. May the infection not spread!

When the fetich of the recent grammar-book makers is not logic, it is usually psychology; and the attempted admixture of this science with grammar is worse, if possible, than in the case of logical theory. The psychological mixture results in the abandonment of words altogether, and the child is asked to wrestle with "ideas." He is told: "The *copula-idea* is that which asserts that an *attribute-idea* belongs to an *object-idea*." He is taught: "The mind is furnished (!) with five kinds of *ideas*:" and, "Interjections are the signs of *feelings*, but not of *ideas*." And finally he is told by one normal-school professor, in

a recent pretentious text: "*The verb is a word which expresses a thought-relation.*" This definition forces its author to classify the verb and the preposition together as "words of relation," which he calmly proceeds to do. But will the educational public receive without protest such distortion of grammatical truth?

It is important that every teacher of grammar in America recognize the fallacy in this position, for almost surely a dozen new texts will hasten to repeat the error within a twelve-month. Is it not obvious that *every possible grammatical construction shows thought-relation of some sort?* And is not the subject of syntax an attempt to reduce to a system thought-relations as shown by words? Predication is no more an expression of "thought-relation" than is apposition or any other construction. The moment two words are used in juxtaposition they express some thought-relation in the mind of the speaker. Whether we say to the baby, "Sugar—sweet," in the natural mother-way of the untutored savage, or, "The sugar is sweet," in the artistic mode of grammatical art, the "thought-relation" is identical in the two expressions.

The preposition is a relation-word not because it expresses thought-relations more absolutely than do other parts of speech, but because it expresses actual relations of every sort which exist in fact, as of place, position, source, direction, and the like. No other part of speech except the preposition expresses relations thus, although subordinate conjunctions shade into prepositions. It is immaterial whether we say, *The dress was blue*, or *It was a blue dress*, or *It was a dress of blue*. The *thought-relation* in these three expressions is identical, whether it is implied by the adjective, or expressed by the preposition, or asserted by the verb.

It is peculiarly unfortunate that this last glaring misconception of the function of the verb should be added to the long list of previous errors befogging the minds of teachers and of pupils. Once again, be it said with all possible emphasis, *every syntactical relation is a thought-relation.*

The failure to see that there is a marked difference between the proposition of logic and the sentence of grammar is usually

accompanied by another failure—that of not comprehending the real nature of the verb. Not a text yet published, so far as I am able to determine, recognizes that free and varied communication of thought may occur without the use of verbs. Apparently it has been wholly forgotten that the verb was the last part of speech to be differentiated, and that there are still uncivilized tribes which have not yet developed the verb. It would be absurd to claim that these tribes neither think nor communicate thought. They do communicate thought easily enough, although they have not as yet developed that particular art-form which we call the sentence.

Originally all words were names. In order to show thought-relation of various sorts the simple method of *apposition*, or of placing words side by side, was first invented. Gradually, the adjective and then the other parts of speech were differentiated, and last of all the verb. This fact seems not to have come to the knowledge of many writers who state that “Young children use many verbs among their first words.” The reverse is true: very young children use almost no verbs at all. What is mistaken for verbs are the numerous “action words,” or verbal nouns, which are as truly nouns to the child and to the grammarian as are any other names of sense-objects. But how long shall this truth be ignored?

The time is almost here when the truth that the modern sentence is an *art-product* must be recognized. The sentence is the norm of cultivated expression, although it is not essential to the communication of thought. Whether or not we think in sentences can be determined in any individual case only by learning the habit of that individual. But that one’s thinking depends upon the number and clearness of his ideas, and that these in turn depend upon the vocabulary which has been mastered, is the really vital truth which language-teaching is bound to recognize if it is ever to get upon a sound basis. Luckily for our graded schools, college presidents are at last beginning to take an interest in elementary principles, and one college president, Mr. Edwin W. Doran, of Mississippi, has published rather startling figures

as the result of ten years' work in investigating vocabularies of elementary pupils.¹

Professor Brander Matthews, of Columbia University, very justly said that the modern grammar-texts of America are usually "grotesque in their ignorance." But the most grotesque of them all—those which try to marry logic and grammar, or psychology and grammar—had not been written when Professor Matthews made his famous criticism. Bad as many of the earlier texts were, at least they had not forgotten that grammar deals with *words* rather than with *ideas*, and that a verb is a word which makes an assertion.

It is high time that a reaction should set in against the false grammatical theory now exploited in many recent texts. What the schools need in this line is an elementary course in old-fashioned grammar, unadulterated with logic or psychology. And, incidentally, in steering clear of Scylla, let us not sail into the jaws of Charybdis by trying to unite literature and grammar. Any eighth-grade class which has been well trained in English can easily master elementary grammar in a year, if the grammar is really grammar. But when misunderstood logic is added to equally misunderstood psychology and a heavy dose of literature is spread over all, there is little hope for the floundering child. Then speed the day when every school shall offer a short, intensive, but comprehensive course in grammar pure and simple, divested of every scrap of logic, of literature, or of psychology!

¹ *Pedagogical Seminary*, December, 1908.